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AUTHOR Allender, Susan Chou
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ABSTRACT

A discussion of adult learners of English-as-a-Second-Language (ESL) with special needs draws on what has been learned in an Australian program of adult immigrant ESL education and acculturation. It summarizes research undertaken within this program to identify groups of adult learners with special needs and the learning barriers that face them, gives examples of curriculum strategies, classroom practices, and policy initiatives developed to overcome these barriers and improve the effectiveness of learning, and identifies issues still to be resolved. Learner characteristics found to affect the pace and success of formal language learning include these: lack of or limited formal education; no experience of formal learning as adults; disrupted education due to war or other political crisis; first-language functional illiteracy; background in non-roman script language; old age; trauma; and significantly different cultural backgrounds and educational perspectives. Curriculum strategies, classroom practices, program design elements, and policy initiatives to address each of these circumstances are outlined. Issues remaining to be resolved include: measuring instructional effectiveness over time; providing for lifelong learning; providing alternative sin employment; and creating a new paradigm supporting productive diversity. (Contains 29 references.) (MSE) (Adjunct ERIC Clearinghouse on Literacy Education)

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Since 1945, 5.5 million settlers from 160 different countries have established new lives in Australia (York, 1995). At that time, the government launched a large-scale planned immigration initiative to build the country's postwar infrastructure that included several components. For example, the Adult Migrant English Program (AMEP) was created as part of the government's strategy to facilitate the settlement process. The Australian Second Language Proficiency Rating (ASLPR) was developed to provide a common language assessment scale. The teaching workforce was professionalized through a generous policy of study leave for teachers to gain specialist qualifications in teaching English as a Second Language (ESL). An alliance was established between AMEP providers and a key academic center for teaching and research, now known as the National Centre for English Language Teaching and Research (NCELTR).

Yet, despite its high professional quality, English language instruction for adults remained marginalized. It was regarded as part of immigration services rather than education. There was no mechanism to accredit courses, issue credentials, or transfer credits into higher education or vocational programs.

In the 1990s, a convergence of factors provided the impetus for moving English language teaching from the fringes into mainstream vocational education and training reform. Research undertaken during the International Year of Literacy uncovered the extent of adult illiteracy among the Australian-born (Wickert, 1989), raising considerable concern in the community. At the same time, the re-structuring of Australian industry to become competitive globally served to highlight vital links between language and literacy skills and employment, productivity, and training.

This Q & A summarizes research undertaken within the AMEP to identify groups of adult learners with special needs and the learning barriers that face them; it gives examples of curriculum strategies, classroom practices, and policy initiatives developed to overcome these barriers and improve the effectiveness of learning; and it identifies issues still to be resolved.

Who is Targeted as a Special Needs Learner?

A study commissioned by government in 1995 to report on the adequacy of adult English language and literacy provision showed that clients with special needs were unlikely to achieve the target exit level of proficiency (NCELTR, 1996). Program outcomes reported by a 1994 AMEP review (McNaught & McGrath, 1997) indicated that while 78% of clients achieved exit level requirements and 37% exited at the optimum level III, of the Certificate in Spoken and Written English (CSWE), only 8 % of clients with limited formal education or a low level of literacy in their first language attained the target level III and 43% did not even meet the exit level requirements at the lower I and II levels of the CSWE.

Learner characteristics which have been found to have an impact on the pace and success of formal language learning include the following:

- no formal education;
- limited formal education (i.e. less than seven years);
- no experience of formal learning as adults;
- disrupted education due to war or other political crisis;
- functional illiteracy in first language;
- non-roman script background;
- elderly;
- suffering severe effects of political torture and trauma; and
- cultural backgrounds and educational perspectives significantly different from those of Anglo-Australian culture (McPherson, 1997).

In the AMEP, learners with one or more of the these indicators are acknowledged as requiring instruction that takes account of these needs. Learners are offered a range of course options that vary in length, learning pace, intensity, focus, and delivery modes to best meet their disparate needs and backgrounds.

What curriculum strategies and classroom practices meet these special needs?

Teaching methods are designed to build confidence and promote success in the classroom, thereby reducing learner anxiety. The methodology is considerably more contextualized, concrete, multisensorial, and hands on than that offered to learners without special needs. Careful consideration is given to appropriate and clear visual aids, diagrams, and experiential learning.

Learners with minimal first language literacy: Methodology emerging from various case studies of learners with limited first language literacy emphasize the need to focus on the learners' immediate personal experiences, cultural backgrounds, familiar topics, and concrete, real world materials rather than abstract and decontextualized themes.

Careful analysis of learner responses to pedagogic practices common in language classrooms reveal that some of these activities assume too much shared cultural knowledge. Graphics and written work sheets, instead of reinforcing language and aiding comprehension, can confuse learners and become barriers to learning (Achren, 1991). Introducing abstract notions such as the alphabet and decontextualized vocabulary as preliminary steps to literacy can be meaningless (Hood & Kightley, 1991). Even simple line drawings may not be as transparent as teachers think for learner groups who do not have the same cultural frames and life experiences (Hiffeldt, 1985; Ramm, 1994).

Learning sequences need to begin with concrete experience and slowly build up to more complex and abstract concepts. Ramm (1994) recommends using real objects to set an immediate

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and meaningful context, gradually replacing them with photos or realistic pictures, then substituting these with more abstract diagrams or graphics. Huntington (1992) illustrates sequential course design based on a language experience approach to reading and writing for pre-literate adult Hmong refugees. Bilingual assistance is seen as invaluable in clarifying assumptions and interpretations of meanings.

Learners with minimal formal schooling: Learners who have had limited previous experience of formal education have difficulties managing information input, organizing learning material, following verbal and written instructions, and processing large chunks of new language (Herbert & McFeeter, 1994). They are distressed by error or by failure to recall learned language. They appear not to utilize information processing skills used by those with higher levels of education. In fact, a study of non-language outcomes in the AMEP found a strong inter-relationship between the acquisition of learning skills and language-specific gains (Jackson, 1994). These learners benefit from instruction in techniques for study management, problem solving, memorizing, categorizing, the use of reference tools such as dictionaries, and the explicit transfer of skills to other contexts. Instructors need to continually recycle language and skills, include physical activities, and make frequent changes of activities.

Elderly language learners: English classes offer elderly migrants the opportunity to decrease their isolation and facilitate their access to services and community activities. Studies of aged second language learners have established that the right physical and learning environment can compensate for physiological and socio-cultural variables such as perceptual acuity, psychomotor coordination, and language-memory that are likely to affect their performance and progress (Er, 1986; Green & Piperis 1987). Recommendations include highly contextualized language relevant to the learners' experiences, concrete tasks, multisensorial modalities, recycling of content at increasingly deeper levels, and optimal physical conditions. Learner anxiety can be reduced by creating supportive relationships within the class, slowing the pace of instruction, putting the emphasis on receptive rather than productive skills, and downplaying the role and formality of assessments.

Learners with experiences of trauma: A substantial number of refugees arriving in Australia are survivors of torture and other forms of traumatic experience. The long term effects of these damaging experiences often impact in varying ways on the learning of English, with key factors relating to the survivors' confidence and self esteem as learners, their motivation to learn, and their attitudes towards the target language. Difficult settlement, which may include financial problems, unemployment, children's adjustment to schooling, and experiences of racism and discrimination, inevitably affects learning of the host language. Chronic psychological symptoms, such as memory impairment, short attention span, severe anxiety, and limited concentration, can override positive motivation and impede learning.

Teachers in the AMEP have worked with specialized agencies like the Victorian Foundation for Survivors of Torture to learn how to provide supportive learning conditions. Teachers are trained to recognize distress symptoms and to access professional assistance when needed. They are also trained to evaluate the suitability of topics, resources, and activities for use with these learners and to implement appropriate classroom strategies—e.g. working with aggression, distress, and inattention.

What program design elements facilitate instruction of learners with special needs?

A variety of program arrangements have been introduced in response to the growing awareness of the needs of vulnerable learners. Key principles in designing appropriate options are *flexibility*, *differentiation*, and *continuity* (Plimer, Candlin, Lintjens, & McNaught, 1996). Flexibility of delivery for the target group refers to client choice in terms of location, access, intensity, mode, curriculum, and methodology. Differentiation and continuity require that programs remain contextualized within the mainstream framework and do not, in the process of accommodating special needs, set up new barriers to mainstream access.

The national curriculum framework of the AMEP Certificates I-III in Spoken and Written English (NSW AMES, 1995) differentiates between learners according to three dimensions: their language proficiency level, their learning pace, and their needs and goals in learning English. Within the accredited framework learners are able to access a wide variety of programs, ranging from accelerated bridging courses for professionals, intensive ESL or basic education programs for young adults to community-based ethno-specific or bilingual classes. The articulations between courses and comparability of outcomes with the unified curriculum framework ensures continuity of pathways for all types of learners.

The call for small classes of around 10 students in a quiet and pleasant environment, close to learners and their community has led to a resurgence of community-based classes reminiscent of the earlier decades but with a sharper focus on the needs of the target clientele. Most provide bilingual assistance and on-site childcare and are conducted on weekends or at times to suit the clients. These classes integrate settlement, parenting, and health information with language and literacy skills. They involve partners in the community, including key members of the learners' own communities as well as other service providers, advocates, and volunteers. Careful attention is given to lighting, temperature, acoustics, and seating to create a comfortable, safe, and supportive physical environment.

What policy initiatives have been undertaken to accommodate learners with special needs?

Time: Current immigration policy distinguishes the Refugee and Humanitarian Program from the rest of the Migration Program. Special provisions allow refugees extra time within which to use up their entitlement of 510 hours of free tuition in recognition of the special psychological and other barriers they might face during their initial year of settlement. They are also given greater flexibility in attendance to allow them to withdraw when they feel the need for a break without losing their entitlement. On top of the entitlement to 510 tuition hours, refugees can now have up to 100 additional hours. This extension is provided in recognition of the special needs of the increasing numbers of survivors of torture and trauma and refugees with little or no formal schooling.

Benchmarks: Benchmarks on language gain developed by the Department of Immigration and Multicultural Affairs for the AMEP likewise reflect a recognition that language gain is heavily influenced by factors such as previous level of education and literacy in other languages. Therefore, benchmarks are differentiated according to three learner groupings—slow, standard, or fast pace.

Based on an analysis of the competency achievements of clients in 1996, the Department has developed preliminary client performance targets. They recognize that measuring success simply in terms of the attainment of all of the competencies that comprise a Certificate does not sufficiently recognize learner progress and achievement along the way; they thus measure achievement more finely in terms of actual competencies gained rather than completion of Certificate requirements. They take into account the fact that, as U.S. educators Burt and Keenan pointed out (1996, p.10), "just as one single measure cannot address all purposes for assessment, neither can one measure address all aspects of learner growth and ability."

More work is being done to validate this approach to measuring program outcomes. It is nevertheless important to ensure that the diversity of client need is supported not just in terms of differentiating service delivery but also in defining and measuring the benefits they produce for the clients.

What issues remain to be resolved?

Measuring effectiveness over time: All the research into the learning needs of special needs learners stress the need for time—time to get their families and lives together, time to heal and build up confidence in a future, time to bridge the massive cultural chasm between their old and new lives, and time to learn how to learn. Language courses contribute to settlement related outcomes as well as to language development. The concurrent development of less tangible, non-linguistic skills and qualities such as confidence, cultural awareness, and learning skills would seem essential for the achievement of language gains. It is thus important to measure the effectiveness of the learning experience of these learners in terms broader than language gain or competencies and Certificates achieved (McNaught & McGrath, 1997).

Providing for lifelong learning: Language and literacy development requires a long term commitment from individuals. The high cost of sustaining this long term commitment has been alleviated in some circumstances by government services and augmented for some individuals. Labor market programs have provided a learning pathway for many registered job seekers who needed to continue learning English. Also, opportunities for adults requiring slower paced provision over longer periods to continue their learning may lie in the Adult and Community Education (ACE) sector. Managed and owned by local communities, this sector conducts informal training through a widespread network of learning centers, neighborhood houses, and community organizations. However, the ACE sector is not well resourced, and pressure to compete for mainstream vocational education and training funds is causing the sector increasingly to formalize the nature of its provision, thereby threatening its diversity. Further, a current trend towards "user pays" which shifts costs of education and training to the learner is likewise causing anxiety for clients with low incomes for whom cost is a major barrier.

Providing alternatives in employment: While some migrants and refugees with limited language skills, especially women, may find casual employment or self employment in low skill areas, many are likely to join the ranks of the long term unemployed. The increased demand for literacy on the job is causing migrants to turn away from the job market and establish their own businesses. Strengthening existing ethnic small businesses and supporting more job seekers from language backgrounds other than English to make the transition from unemployed to entrepreneur would have spin-off benefits in reducing the high unemployment rates of those unable to compete for jobs in the open market because of limited English proficiency (Collins, 1997).

Creating a new paradigm—productive diversity: To make better use of the tremendous resources brought into the country by its immigration program, Australia needs a new paradigm. Instead of viewing people with limited English as dysfunctional and unable to contribute productively to the national economy, the community should recognize and value the skills that they possess. Immigrants who speak the languages of Australia's trading partners have key roles to play in Australia's push into world markets. These come from these countries, understand their cultures intimately, and have continuing personal networks. Unfortunately, business has been slow to maximize the competitive advantage offered by the country's linguistic and cultural diversity, which remains largely untapped (Hay, 1996).

What is the prognosis for the future?

Labor market statistics clearly establish that new arrivals are particularly vulnerable during the initial settlement period. Those who speak no English at all have a 70% unemployment rate in their first year. However, indications are that migrants do adapt to Australia and that, over time, their employment rates fall to levels comparable with those born in Australia (Ackland, Williams, & Marshall, 1992).

The prognosis seems to be even brighter for the children of migrants and refugees. A study of second generation Australians indicates that they have achieved educational credentials well beyond their parents' generation, as well as third or earlier generation Australians of the same age group. They also have a "striking degree of upward mobility" and manage to find occupations commensurate with their qualifications (Khoo, 1995, p. 11).

While these trends are encouraging, the path to successful settlement in this highly literate, technologically driven society will nevertheless be long and painful for the learners described in this paper.

Conclusion

The Australian experience indicates that it is possible to develop curriculum practices, program design, and policies that can effectively address the educational needs of language learners with limited first language literacy and minimal formal education. Participation in education changes peoples' lives and improves their life chances, enabling them to develop to their full potential, achieve security for themselves and their families, and contribute productively to their communities. Australia has had a long and proud tradition of opening its doors to individuals and families who have been displaced by war and other traumatic circumstances. It is striving to honor this commitment by ensuring that the settlement program opens up to them the opportunities that come with having the skills and confidence to learn in new ways and to continue learning throughout their lives.

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